

## An Interview with Lily Afshar

by Robert Ferguson

Lily Afshar emigrated from Iran to the United States in 1977. Over the next several years she earned BM (1981), MM (1984), and DMA (1989) degrees in guitar performance from Boston Conservatory, New England Conservatory, and Florida State University respectively. She also attended summer classes at the Banff Centre for Fine Arts and Aspen Music Festival, and received scholarships for three summers of study (1987, 1988, 1991) with Oscar Ghiglia at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, for which she received three Diplomas of Merit. She was also among twelve international guitarists selected to play in the 1986 Segovia masterclass at the University of Southern California. She has taught at the University of Memphis, where she is Professor of Guitar, since the early 1990s.

Afshar has received many honors in the course of her career, including the University of Memphis 2008 Distinguished Teaching Award, Boston Conservatory's 2011 Distinguished Alumni Award, 2000 Board of Visitors Eminent Faculty Award, 2000 Orville H. Gibson Award for Best Female Classical Guitarist, and a National Endowment for the Arts Recording Award. During her years of schooling she also garnered top prizes in various guitar competitions, including those of the American String Teachers Association (1983), Music Teachers National Association (1984), Aspen Music Festival (1986), and Guitar Foundation of America (1988).

Afshar has given solo, chamber, and orchestral performances across North, Central, and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Her live and recorded programs include standard works of the classical guitar canon, premieres of new works, and music that embraces her Persian heritage, the last of which she occasionally performs on the Middle Eastern *seh-tar*.

**Robert Ferguson (RF):** Lily, let's talk about performing first. What's your general approach to preparing a program to be put on disc?

**Lily Afshar (LA):** I typically have some special pieces that I strongly believe in. Usually they're premieres or have some other special thing attached to them. For example, they're my own arrangements, like ones of Persian music that I think are very novel and no one has done before, or new interpretations of previously performed pieces. Some are written for me. Some are my own fingerings—well, they're all my own fingerings actually. [Laughs]



Above: Lily Afshar

**RF:** How does your selection process differ when planning recorded programs versus recitals?

**LA:** In a live performance you have to be really varied and entertain the audience. You don't put too many intellectual pieces one after another. You have to spread them out. But on a CD people can listen to the same piece over and over and come to understand it.

**RF:** So you're inclined to present more accessible music in your live performances?

**LA:** Yes. And if there's one very intellectual piece, say with quarter tones, I'm very careful where I place it in the concert. I don't put it back-to-back with other heavy-duty pieces. You have to give the audience a break.

**RF:** What are some of the pieces you've premiered on your CDs? Let's start with your first one, *24 Caprichos de Goya*.

**LA:** My *Caprichos* was the American premier of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's work, but not a world premiere. Yamashita did it first in Japan, right before I did it.

**RF:** We should mention that your *Caprichos* CD was preceded a few years earlier by a long article you published in *Guitar Review*. There you discussed Tedesco's work in depth.

**LA:** Right. That was around 1990.

**RF:** A *Jug of Wine and Thou* was your next recording?

**LA:** Yes. I premiered my own *Five Popular Persian Ballads* on that one, and Mel Bay published the score the next year. I was very much impressed by Llobet's Catalan folksong arrangements, like "El Mestre" (which we all sang for Segovia at his 1986 USC masterclass, and which I played for him). The Llobet version is so artistic and beautiful. I've tried to do the same with my Persian arrangements, to make them sound like they were originally conceived for guitar.

**RF:** *The Persian music you program falls into about three categories. One is your arrangements of traditional melodies, which you just gave an example of. Another consists of original works written specifically for you by others and inspired by Middle Eastern idioms, and we'll get to those in a minute. A third category involves works composed independently of you, also inspired by Middle Eastern idioms, that you interpret based on your knowledge of Persian musical traditions. I'm thinking in particular of Domeniconi's Koyunbaba, which is also on Jug of Wine. Could you describe your approach to that piece?*

**LA:** *Koyunbaba* is like improvisation to me. It needs that quality to capture its Middle Eastern spirit. You can't play it stiff and strictly. It's got to be done with freedom in it.

**RF:** *That's apparent in the way you add ornamentation and a brief cadenza to it.*

**LA:** Exactly.

**RF:** *And it's probably why Classical Guitar magazine once called your version the best Koyunbaba out there.*

**LA:** I think so.

**RF:** *Okay, so then you recorded Possession.*

**LA:** *Possession* has many world premieres, starting with *Scherzo* by Salvador Brotons, which he wrote for me. There's also *Omar's Fancy* by Dušan Bogdanović, composed for me as well. Its title refers to Persian writer Omar Khayyam and a famous poem of his, published in the printed music, that extols the idea of friends enjoying their short time together, drinking wine, because this is all life is. (This poem also inspired the title of *A Jug of Wine and Thou*.) Dušan's *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue for the Golden Flower* is on *Possession* too. Alice Artzt recorded the first two sections of the piece but not the fugue, so I did the premiere of that. *Possession* also premieres a work by Barbara Kolb, *Broken Slurs*, and a work by Turkish-American composer Kamran Ince, *MKG Variations*. Kamran wrote it originally for cello, and together we arranged it for guitar.

**RF:** *Which brings us to Hemispheres.*

**LA:** *Hemispheres* initiated my quarter-tone phase. I added quarter tone frets, or fretlets, to my fingerboard in order to play the music of Reza Vali, an Iranian composer who teaches at Carnegie Mellon University. I couldn't bend the strings all the time—another way quarter tones can be produced—so the ex-

tra frets were necessary. Reza wrote two pieces for me: *Gozaar*, included on *Hemispheres*, and *Kord*, which is on *One Thousand and One Nights*, the CD that I recorded in Iran. On *Hemispheres* I also premiered *Triptych*, Op. 102, and *Adagio*, Op. 44, by Polish composer Gerard Drozd, and *Fantasia on a Traditional Persian Song* by Gary Eister, where he experiments with quarter tones by retuning the instrument. John Schneider's pieces on that album, *Prelude* and *Fugato*, are premieres too—very challenging and virtuosic.

There are times when I hear a piece differently than it's been recorded and for that reason want to record it myself. *Como Lloro una Estrella* by Antonio Carillo is an example from the *Hemispheres* album. John Williams recorded it, but when I went to Venezuela they actually sang the piece for me. Hearing it that way was a revelation. I decided I had to play it like that. My rendition is very different from the Williams! [Laughs]

**RF:** *Tell us more about One Thousand and One Nights.*

**LA:** I did some of the warhorses on that one—the Rodrigo *Fandango* and works like that—but Carlo Domeniconi also wrote me a piece called *Nam* that's premiered there. Also on that album I have two Azerbaijani ballads that I arranged and presented for the first time, and four more Persian ballads. [A previously unpublished Persian ballad of Lily's appears on pages 19–21 of this issue.]

I think we've been playing so much Spanish music it's time to look at some other country whose music we aren't as familiar with. This is why in my concerts and recordings I present my own Azerbaijani and Persian arrangements. And people love them. I ask, "What did you like most about my concert?" They often say the Persian pieces, despite the fact that I also play Spanish repertoire for them. That makes me feel good, that my arrangements are working.



Above: Lily Afshar



## An Interview with Lily Afshar (continued)

**RF:** That leaves two more CDs.

**LA:** The next one was *Musica da Camera*. It has Vladislav Uspenski's *Musical Sketches on Pushkin's Eugene Onegin* on it. I noticed that no one else had recorded the work. Since I like to be a pioneer in things, and I had a good group of musicians here in Memphis, I suggested we try it. We read through it and liked it, so I said, "We can't let this go to waste; let's record it." I was really happy with how it came out.

**RF:** Your most recent CD is an all-Bach one, *Bach on Fire*. There are no world premieres on it, but you still offer something new. How is your approach to Bach different?

**LA:** I've always thought that guitarists had a hard time playing Bach. During my years of schooling here in America, I would see cellists play his solo suites for their instrument, and do them beautifully, while guitarists struggled. That always bothered me. I thought, why are we struggling with Bach so much? And in teaching I found myself changing everybody's fingerings all the time to make the music easier. I thought the available editions were too complicated. We weren't even enjoying the music. We were suffering. We were scared to death to play Bach! [Laughs]

So I decided to make my own edition of these suites. I noticed that if I used cross-string fingerings as much as possible, it completely changed the sound and effect. The overall result is wonderful and eliminates many hardships. However, when you approach the music this way, you often have to stretch five frets instead of four to get the cross-string effect you're after. But it isn't that hard to do and it expands the technique of the guitar somewhat, at least when applied to Bach. In this kind of cross-string playing, you really have to pay attention to your right-hand fingering too. This is the method of transcription I used for *Bach on Fire*.

**RF:** In Iran you began studying at age ten and didn't have any trouble finding a teacher. So was there a fairly active classical guitar community there?

**LA:** People love the guitar in Iran. There were many guitar teachers and still are. My teacher was at Tehran Conservatory. But the quality of teachers is another matter. There was a huge difference between them and teachers in America. I noticed that right off when I came here. Still, they were good enough for me to get accepted to Boston Conservatory.

**RF:** Were classical guitar recordings from the West readily available in Iran at that time?

**LA:** There was something of a shortage with recordings but more so with sheet music. There was one big music store in Tehran that had lots of piano and other kinds of music, but the guitar selection was very limited. Everybody would photocopy what music there was, but



Above: Lily Afshar

after so many reproductions of reproductions the quality got really bad; the notes would practically disappear. So when I first came to Boston in 1977, I went crazy buying music and records. We didn't have enough of either in Iran.

**RF:** Did you leave Iran because revolution was impending there? You left a year or so before it broke out, didn't you?

**LA:** I just finished high school and was already planning to come to the States. I didn't leave Iran because of the revolution, but because of the revolution I didn't go back. I was basically stuck in America. Originally I just wanted to get a bachelor's degree and return home to teach and play concerts. But then I ended up staying on and getting a master's, a doctorate, and a job! [Laughs] I didn't plan on all of that.

Iran went to shambles because of its war with Iraq and the revolution. So I had to make the best of my situation. For instance, what do foreign students do during the summer? It's very tricky if you can't go home. I attended the Aspen Music Festival, Banff Centre for Fine Arts in Canada, and was fortunate to receive scholarships to the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, for three summers. So as much as possible I would travel and study.

**RF:** So you couldn't go back to Iran for a couple of decades. What changed so you could?

**LA:** They got a new president, Khatami. He was more moderate, and he encouraged artists and musicians to return. Around the same time I received this email from an Iranian guitarist in which he asked me, since I was playing all over the world, why I wasn't playing in Iran. That really shook me up. I knew he was right; I should be going back and playing there. So with Khatami in power, I arranged for my return. And my concerts and masterclasses were very well received. I now go back every year and have been doing so for the last thirteen years.

**RF:** When you go back now, do you think there's more going on with the classical guitar than before, better players, better teachers than when you left?

**LA:** I think it's come a long way. Yes, there are more guitarists. During the revolution a lot of young people couldn't do anything fun; they had no place to go. There were curfews and all of that, so they started playing instruments. Though it took almost twenty years, eventually it was okay with the government. The guitar got a boost.

When I went back after twenty-five years away, I did notice that the playing level was behind. After all, they had a revolution; too many doors had been closed. For instance, students I was instructing had never heard of planting technique. I had to explain it from the beginning. And they would come to me and say that their teachers told them to play Bach this way, or to do this or that, and it was just wrong information. In fact, when many of them studied with me, they did it secretly. They wouldn't tell their teachers! [Laughs] So, although guitar there is getting better all the time, there are some old-fashioned pedagogues whose minds will be hard to change.

Anyway, after ten years of that, I finally wrote two guitar method books, in Persian, to address these issues. The first volume goes from beginner to intermediate and has eighty-nine pieces in it, which I play on two CDs that are included. The second volume, intermediate to advanced, has about eighty more pieces in it, again with two CDs. I felt it was my duty to do that for my Iranian friends.

**RF:** How is concert attendance there?

**LA:** Concerts in Iran are packed. People just storm to them. I play solo ones every year and sometimes with an orchestra. This year I'm going to play with an Iranian flutist based in Vienna. We'll be touring the country.

**RF:** What audience size do you usually get?

**LA:** From 300 up. And I have to play two nights in every location. Tehran has a population of fifteen million, so I play two nights on the east side and two nights on the west. And all levels of players come to study with me, both privately and in masterclasses.

**RF:** When you performed for Segovia in his 1986 masterclass at USC, he quipped, "I can see you have the flamenco spirit and the Persian blood in you." Does your immersion in Eastern music and culture affect the way you perform music of Western traditions as well?

**LA:** No, I separate those. The essence of good performance comes down to this: you have to have good technique and you have to think. Those two things apply to every piece you play. I have a special understanding of Persian and Azerbaijani music because I come from that culture. Western music I studied in college and listened to all my life, and I learned to focus on its stylistic aspects: how a Baroque piece should be played as opposed to Classical, Renaissance, and so on. I don't bring my Persian influence into that. I respect the music's historical and geographic origins.

**RF:** Speaking of technique, yours is formidable to say the least. How did you acquire it?

**LA:** I've had very good teachers and I've practiced *a lot*. I played ten hours a day from the moment I arrived in America until I got my job at the University of Memphis and even after. When I came here, I was thirsty to learn. Students in the United States too often take for granted what they have here, the best teachers, the best festivals, and I wasn't going to waste any of that. I took full advantage of all the opportunities given to me.

**RF:** Who were your principal teachers?

**LA:** I got a lot of good technical instruction from Neil Anderson and Bruce Holzman. Oscar Ghiglia emphasized how to be a musician. I couldn't have found better teachers to help me become the guitarist I am. And I worked my butt off for them. But I also have to say, I had my own way of doing things. If the teacher said to learn two pieces, I'd learn three; if he said to learn the major scales, I'd learn the minors too; if he said to get my scales to 132, I'd try to get them to 152. I always challenged myself.

And this is the way it was in Iran too, when I first started the guitar. My father would say, "Come out of your room so we can see you," because I'd just sit in there with my guitar, exploring the frets and the sounds. To me it was like a mysterious box. People would have to tell me, "Stop!" In fact, one time I hurt my finger at Florida State practicing so much. The callus just tore and I couldn't play. I had to get four stitches in my index finger. Of course, I was playing that night again! [Laughs]



Above: Lily Afshar

**RF:** How did you structure your practice time?

**LA:** Well, I would learn and memorize. I told myself, “You’re going to learn and memorize two pages a day.” And I wouldn’t come out of the practice room until I did. Then there was one summer when I just practiced scales, because my teachers were after me about that. Once I got them fast and clean, they left me alone. Then I just did pieces. [Laughs]

I remember at Florida State I learned the Ginastera sonata in like four days. I was always intent on getting a piece entirely under my fingers as soon as possible. Once I learned it, of course, I spent time perfecting it. Through that whole process I would just lock myself up; no social life or anything. Additional practice time was devoted to learning new pieces people would send me, as well as going over the old pieces in my repertoire. At one point I had three different programs going on at the same time, plus concertos.

**RF:** Any final words?

**LA:** Only that, in broad terms, the main motives that lie behind all my teaching, concertizing, recording, and publishing are to expand the repertoire of the guitar and bring notice to Persian and Azerbaijani music, which few have heard. I see the pursuit of those two goals as my duty, my *raison d’être*.

For more information on Lily Afshar, or to obtain the sheet music for her Persian and Azerbaijani ballads, visit [lilyafshar.com](http://lilyafshar.com).

## Lily Afshar List of Works

### CDs

- 24 Caprichos de Goya*, Summit, 1994.
- A Jug of Wine and Thou*, Summit, 1999.
- Possession*, Archer, 2002.
- Hemispheres*, Archer, 2006.
- One Thousand and One Nights*, Mahoor, 2012.
- Musica da Camera*, Archer, 2013.
- Bach on Fire*, Archer, 2014.

### DVDs

- Virtuoso Guitar*, Mel Bay, 2008.
- Classical Guitar Secrets*, 2 vols (6 discs), GuitarControl, 2011.

### Books & Music

- Kamran Ince, *MKG Variations*, ed. Lily Afshar, Schott, 1998.
- Five Popular Persian Ballads*, Mel Bay, 2000.
- Classical Guitar Method* (in Persian), 2 vols, Mahoor, 2011.
- Bach: Arranged for the Guitar*, Mel Bay, 2012.

### Feature Articles

“Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s *24 Caprichos de Goya* and Their Relation to Goya’s Etchings,” 3 parts, *Guitar Review* 79, 80, 81 (Fall 1989–Spring 1990); published in Italian and German translation in *Il Fronimo* 73, 74 (Oct 1990, Jan 1991) and *Gitarre & Laute* 13, nos. 3 & 5; 14, nos. 2 & 6; 15, nos. 2 & 5; 16, no. 1 (1991–1994).

“My Musical Journey to Iran,” *Soundboard* 36, no. 3 (2010).

### Reviews

Numerous reviews of newly released guitar recordings written for *American Record Guide*, vol. 61, no. 3 (May/June 1998) through vol. 63, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2000).

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# DOKHTAREH BOYER AHMADI

(The Girl from Boyer Ahmad)

traditional Persian Ballad from Lorestan

LILY AFSHAR

**Allegretto** (♩. = 66)

*art. harm. 8va*

*cantabile*

17

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VII

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IV

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*pont.*

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*art. harm. 8va*

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